Henry VIII

No Founder

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A NATIONAL GUILD OF CHURCHMEN TRACT

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What Episcopalian is not familiar with the tale that King Henry VIII of England founded the Church of England? This has been taught as a fact of history in our common schools and passes for common knowledge. And it is utterly untrue.

Largely in consequence of this tale, very many Episcopalians think of their Church as a creature of the Reformation differing in no very important way from the denominations which have their origin in that disruption of the Catholic Church, such as the various Lutheran Sects (derived from followers of Martin Luther), or the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, etc., derived from followers of John Calvin and therefore called Calvinists; or the Methodists, who originated as a distinct body about the year 1800. The Methodist Church is an Anglican tragedy caused, in England, by a want of imagination and initiative on the part of the bishops resulting in failure to provide priests for John Wesley's converts, and in the United States by the weakness of the little, new Episcopal Church struggling to maintain its existence and therefore unable to hold out a hand to anybody. No sooner was Wesley dead than his disciples, contrary to his hopes and prayers, set up for themselves with a new ministry of their own making. And one is forced to wonder how they could have done otherwise!

All of these bodies set up new ministries of their own making. Until the Reformation there was one Christian ministry and one only. That ministry was and is a continuous thing brought

down from the beginnings by unbroken succession of ordinations by bishops. It is the Catholic ministry of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. The chain of successive delegations of ministerial authority derived from the Apostles has never been broken. It is the ministry with which Episcopalians are familiar.

Without doubt there was great corruption in the late mediaeval Church, and in particular among the hierarchy at Rome. Reform was desperately needed. But we Episcopalians can not condone the Reformers' act in breaking the succession and losing the authority handed down from the Apostles themselves to represent our Lord as His ministers. That is what these Reformers all did, and the Churches which resulted are new Churches, dating from the Reformation or, in the case of the Methodists, later. Reform, as it sweeps away opposition and gathers force, often runs to indefensible extremes, destroying much which it should be purifying and preserving.

If it were true that Henry VIII founded the Church of England, our Episcopal Church and all of the Anglican Communion would indeed be a creature of the Reformation differing in no important way from the denominations which have their origin in that disruption of the Catholic Church. But that is not true although, sadly enough, commonly believed. It will be well to get in mind the "high spots" of the facts of history relating to the Anglican Church.

Henry VIII wished the Pope to declare void his marriage to Catharine of Aragon. The Pope

temporized endlessly and at last Henry put an end to papal authority and jurisdiction in England, which he arrogated to himself. Then the King was excommunicated by the Pope in retaliation. Otherwise, the Church remained, in England, as it had been, with the same churches, the same dioceses, the same parishes, the same bishops, the same priests, the same sacraments, the same services, and the same people. Later, Henry suppressed the religious orders and seized their property.

If these things amounted to founding a new Church, then Henry founded a new Church; otherwise, not.

On Henry's death his son Edward VI succeeded him. Edward being a young boy, his short reign was conducted by regents. These people had imbibed the teachings not only of Luther, but of Calvin and even Zwingli. They set to work to subject the Church of England to their views. Archbishop Cranmer could not or would not resist them. In 1549 came the first English Prayer Book. There followed steps toward reducing the Church to subservience to the continental Reformers, and in 1552 the second English Prayer Book was imposed on the Church by law. It was a real step along the continental Reformers' road. However, it never came into general use because of the death of the king and the accession of Mary Tudor, known to history as "Bloody Mary," and her Spanish husband.

Upon Queen Mary's accession communion with Rome was re-established, the English service books were outlawed, the Latin mass

prevailed everywhere, the papal authority was restored, and all was as it had been before Henry's breach with Rome except for the absence of the religious orders. And where was Henry's new Church now, supposing that he did found one?

During Mary's reign the bulk of the bishops and clergy were the same who had served the Church all along. Some had died and others had succeeded them, but the changes of personnel from Henry's time and before were the normal changes which time brings, except for some, approaching three hundred in number (notably Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer), whom Mary had burned as heretics.

Thus the Church of England's existence was continuous from the times before Henry's quarrel with the Pope to the accession in 1558 of Queen Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth succeeded, the Church of England was, of course, in full communion with Rome, and this continued for several years. But there were in England enough influential people both clerical and lay who wanted ecclesiastical reform and opposed the papal influence, to make it a matter of serious political hazard for the queen to admit submission to the Roman jurisdiction. She declined to send representatives to the Council of Trent, then in progress. She went forward with ecclesiastical reform and with the establishing once more of service books in English. The Church, with respect to changes of personnel, continued normally. Changes occurred as new bishops were consecrated and new priests ordained to replace the losses of time.

Elizabeth's policy of aloofness exhausted the patience of the Roman authority. A papal bull was uttered purporting to depose the queen from her throne and excommunicate every subject of hers who should continue to recognize her as sovereign. This folly naturally found no favour in England. The idea was abhorrent that a pope could remove an English sovereign. The people remained loyal to their queen and there was an end to communion between the Church of England and the Roman see. And the Church of England continued on with the same dioceses, the same bishops, the same priests, the same parishes, the same people. There has been no interruption of that continuity notwithstanding the period of Cromwell's dictatorship.

We may pause here to cast our minds back over this familiar history, and ask ourselves at what point the old Church of England came to an end and a new Church of England was founded.

Evidently no new Church of England was ever founded by Henry VIII or anyone else. The Church of England is the same Church of England which existed in the days of St. Augustine of Canterbury, and its daughter Churches, including our Episcopal Church, have the same ministry that has existed in England from the beginnings of Christianity there. So, the many Episcopalians are greatly mistaken who think of their Church as a creature of the Reformation differing in no very important way from the Churches of the Calvinists and the Lutherans and the Methodists and the others whose ministries are self-created.

The Apostolic origin of the ministry of our Episcopal Church is insisted upon in our reliance on the Apostolic Succession, familiar to us all. But all too often the essential importance of that continuity of authority is not made clear.

A single illustration may perhaps illuminate the subject. Among the duties of a priest is the pronouncement of absolution (Prayer Book, page 294). Absolution is equivalent to "thy sins are forgiven thee." Surely we all remember how the Jews denounced our Lord for saying that very thing to a sick man whom He cured. And the ground of denunciation was that it was blasphemous since God alone can forgive sins, a proposition which our Lord would not have denied. It was not blasphemous for Him to say that, because He had God's authority.

We remember also that our Lord said to His Apostles that whose sins they should forgive would be forgiven and whose sins they should retain would be retained, whereby the Apostles received the power (divine authority) to pronounce absolution, not in their own right but as God's agents.

The perpetuation of the ministry required the delegation of the Apostolic authority to successors, the bishops, and that is the inestimable importance of the Apostolic Succession. The bishops sub-delegate some of their authority to the priests. In our Prayer Book (see page 546) we find this authority given to priests in their ordination: "Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained." And yet, it must never be forgotten that it is God

acting through His authorized agent the priest who really does the forgiving.

It is hoped that this illustrates clearly the need for Apostolic authority, and its effect. Of course absolution is not the only power transmitted through that succession, but the principle is the same throughout. If our Church were such as the Reformation Churches are, with their self-constituted ministries, Apostolic authority would not exist in it.

Comparisons are odious, and one is not eager to compare our Church with the Reformation Churches. Yet it would not be right for us to be forgetful of the inestimable benefits which we possess through our continuity with the Apostolic Church.

In the Apostolic authority that is ours through the Apostolic Succession, our Church has something indispensable to cherish and protect, and it is something which a Reformation Church founded by a king could not possess. We should proclaim whenever opportunity occurs that it is a falsehood to say that Henry VIII founded the Church of England.

The thing that happened at the Reformation to the Church of England was separation from Rome through Rome's breach of communion. That made a division of the Church. Some five centuries previously there had been another division, when Rome broke communion with the great Church of Constantinople (Orthodox Greek, etc.). None of the bodies thus separated, Roman, Orthodox, or Anglican was a new Church. All were separated parts of THE CHURCH. Our Prayer Book (see title page)

contains "Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church." "The Church" there referred to is the Church of God of which the Greek and other Orthodox bodies, the Churches of the Anglican Communion, the Gallican, Hispanic, and other Churches which are constituent parts of the Roman Catholic Church, and other bodies possessing the Apostolic ministry, are all parts. All of these trace their existence back to the Source, Jesus Christ. And that is how the Episcopal Church differs from the Churches of Reformation origin with their new ministries of their own making.

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